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PP RUEHPA RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNK #0711/01 3071610
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 031610Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8878
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1251
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0891
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2385
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0784
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0237
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RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1304

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 NOUAKCHOTT 000711

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [TIP](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: SLAVERY IN MAURITANIA: AN OVERVIEW AND ACTION PLAN

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 396

[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 486

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARK M. BOULWARE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A deeply entrenched social, cultural and economic phenomenon, slavery is present in both the Moor and Afro-Mauritanian communities and is linked to a caste system rather than exclusively racial considerations. Slavery practices still exist in many forms -- from the most traditional, such as bondage, to more modern variations such as the exploitation of house servants -- and has both a rural and urban face. The stigma surrounding slaves and former slaves spurs discrimination and lack of opportunities. After passing the 2007 law criminalizing slavery, the Government of Mauritania (GIRM), distracted by a year-long political crisis, has deployed limited efforts to date to combat slavery practices, prosecute those who incur in slavery practices or improve the conditions of former slaves. The government has also been negligent in applying any law that combats exploitation of slaves and former slaves, from labor to child abuse laws. Along with political paralysis, a lack of strategy and political will from the government, the denial by the authorities that slavery is an issue, the disconnect between government and civil-society, insufficient awareness about the law, and inadequate funding and programs explain the 2007 law's limited impact to date. In the short term, the government should be encouraged to cooperate with civil society, launch awareness campaigns, train judges, local authorities and police, and provide legal assistance and support to victims. Measures in the mid and long term might include the creation of a special commission or agency focused on the reinsertion of victims of slavery, the creation of a social insertion fund, the opening of training centers and shelters for slaves, and the strengthening and application of labor laws as well as land tenure and inheritance laws. As a societal problem, long term solutions depend on allocation of funding in education to empower the youth in vulnerable communities. End summary.

OVERVIEW: SLAVERY TODAY

[1](#)2. (C) Slavery in Mauritania is a deeply engrained social, cultural and economic phenomenon present in both the Moor and Afro-Mauritanian populations that is linked to a caste system rather than exclusively racial considerations in that most

slave-like relationships occur within an ethnic group (Moor on Moor or Afro-Mauritanian on Afro-Mauritanian). Slavery, or "the state of being bound in servitude as the property of a slaveholder or household," is found in both rural and urban settings and has many faces, from the most traditional (bondage) to the more modern (unpaid and exploited house servants). In Mauritania, both slaves and former slaves are discriminated against for belonging to a slave caste. Slaves are among Mauritania's poorest, most vulnerable, and most disadvantaged populations.

13. (C) Slave families associated for generations with slave-owning families work as household servants, field-hands or shepherds. Members of slave families often live in different households. The atomization of slave families undermines the family support network and increases the slaves' socio-economic and psychological dependency on their masters. The slave-master relationship is paternalistic. The master is everything to the slave because he is the source of food, clothing and shelter. He also provides the slave with an identity. Among the Moors, slaves take pride in belonging to their master's tribe. Slaves -- who are often illiterate -- have no skills, no place to go and no means to be financially independent. Even though they are, in theory and in law, free to go; they would have a hard time leaving their masters because their options are so limited and the dependency so entrenched. The condition of slavery is deeply engrained in their psyche and often slaves do not know and cannot even imagine that their lives could be different or that there is a law in Mauritania that criminalizes slavery. They are simply oblivious to their

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rights as citizens and human beings. Some slaves have benevolent masters and receive food and shelter in exchange for their work. They are considered "part of the family" but this relationship has its limits because of its unbalanced nature. Note: According to tradition, masters have responsibilities towards their slaves and slaves expect their masters to protect them. End note. Anti-slavery advocates often face strong reluctance from victims of slavery in filing complaints. As in every relationship based on dominance and submission, many slaves are exploited and mistreated. Still today, masters lend their slaves' labor to other individuals, female slaves are sexually exploited and children are made to work and rarely receive an education. Slavery particularly affects women and children, who are the most vulnerable among the vulnerable. Women of child-bearing age have a harder time emancipating because they are producers of slave labor and perceived as extremely valuable.

14. (C) Some slaves (legally liberated or not) have been formally emancipated from their masters for years but they often continue depending on them because they lack the means to live independently. In the countryside, communities of former slaves work their masters' land in exchange for a share of the crop. Land tenure conflicts are common because, despite having worked the land for decades, former slaves have no claims over it and no means of acquiring it. Their masters have the power to evict them without explanation, compensation or alternative accommodations. These communities are among the poorest in Mauritania and have limited access to health and education. In the cities, emancipated slaves often continue working long hours for their former masters as servants or as guards for a derisory salary. This accounts for a new, more modern form of exploitation that feeds off Mauritania's fragile labor laws. According to tradition, slaves cannot inherit. As a result, disputes arise when masters or former masters claim their slaves' inheritance.

ISSUES

16. (C) The 2007 law against slavery has yielded no prosecutions. In addition to the recently ended political logjam, the government has made limited progress in the fight against slavery for the following reasons:

- Tacit complicity: Slavery is a sensitive issue that touches the very core of the Mauritanian established social order, in which white Moors have a dominant role. The establishment -- including the central government, provincial authorities such as walis and hakems, religious authorities, and judges -- is closely implicated in the problem and reluctant to tackle it. White Moors are reluctant to subvert a subvert their privileged and even if they attempt to, encounter strong resistance from powerful actors.

- Conflict over terminology and concepts: The authorities and civil society use different terms to address the problem. Government officials and imams talk about "les sequelles de l'esclavage," or the remnants of slavery while civil society speaks of slavery, or slavery practices, and the consequences of slavery. Detractors of the term slavery argue that the slaves are not slaves because they are free to go if they do not want to remain with their masters. These people dismiss the complexities of the slave/master relationship. The ongoing existence or not of slavery practices in Mauritania is a contentious issue -- but almost everybody agrees on the social impact of the remnants of slavery. As believers in the existence of slavery practices, civil society calls for specific programs targeting exploitation through slavery while the government mostly favors poverty reduction programs for populations that are disadvantaged due to their former slave status.

- Lack of political will: Many Mauritaniens, particularly Moors, see the law as an "appeasement measure." For them, the 2007 law is a final admission of the slavery problem that allows the country to move on. They do not view the law as

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something to be acted upon and there is a general reluctance to prosecute slave-masters. Invariably, when slavery cases are brought to court, judges (almost exclusively White Moors) encourage the slave, his/her family and the masters to reach an agreement outside court. There is equally a reluctance to apply other existing laws such as labor laws, child-protection laws or women's rights laws. The charges are ultimately dropped and the case filed without further investigation. Limited resources are devoted to the fight against slavery. Recently, the government adopted a program to Eradicate the Effects of Slavery for 3.7 million USD (Ref A), which -- while substantial by Mauritanian budget standards -- is a very limited amount compared to the type of financial commitment necessary to solve the problem. Civil society and slavery experts are not involved in this program and Gulnara Shahinian, United Nations special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, told PolOff she feared this program was a typical case of "the government paying lip service to the international community." PolOff plans to do a field visit of the program in the next few months.

- Lack of awareness and resources on the part of slaves: First, many slaves ignore their rights and the fact that there is a law in Mauritania criminalizing slavery. Second, slaves wishing to prosecute their masters are often illiterate and do not know how to navigate the legal system. In a country where legal assistance is non-existent, they depend on local NGOs to provide them with a lawyer and help them move through the legal procedures. Slaves who file complaints are often subject to social pressure from their own family members and masters to drop charges.

- Lack of support from religious authorities: Almost unanimously, imams deny the existence of slavery in Mauritania. It is rumored that many of them are slave-owners and rely on their slaves' labor for the upkeep of their properties and cattle. Some imams reacted very

strongly to PolOff's request to discuss slavery, accusing anti-slavery activists of stirring the ethnic pot and using the slavery cause to enrich themselves and put their NGOs on the international spotlight. One imam told PolOff that the State Department's TIP report and anti-slavery efforts would instigate racial hatred in Mauritania. Other imams, while still reluctant to accept that slavery is a reality in Mauritania, agreed that imams could play an important role in helping slaves get over their "inferiority complexes" and the social stigma related to slavery.

- Disconnect between civil society and the government: Civil society is often accused by the establishment of exploiting the slavery issue for political and financial purposes. The government resents civil society, convinced that activists' main focus is to demonstrate the government is a slave government. The disconnect is such that civil society is rarely aware of government efforts. Human Rights Commission Director Tourad Ould Abdel Malek, recently told PolOff the government was ready to launch a national strategy to fight slavery before the end of 2009. When asked whether the government had consulted with civil society, Malek responded they had. When asked when those consultations took place, he uncomfortably responded they had last consulted in 2005!

- Reluctance to accept targeted programs and rejection of affirmative action: Anti-slavery activists call for programs tailored to slaves and former slaves but the authorities and many Mauritians strongly reject the idea. In a country where poverty is rampant among all ethnicities, programs targeting one particular group are perceived as an injustice. PolOff asked White Moor contacts if they thought opening literacy and vocational training centers specifically targeted towards haratines would be a good idea. They pointed out such a measure would cause deep resentment as many in the Afro-Mauritanian and Moor communities are illiterate and also need professional training. Affirmative action programs have the support of traditionally under-represented groups like Afro-Mauritanians and Haratines but tend to be rejected by the White Moors.

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POSSIBLE CORRECTING MEASURES

17. (C) Short-term measures:

- Encourage the government to apply existing laws: Besides the 2007 law criminalizing slavery, Mauritania has a host of laws on forced labor, exploitation, children's rights, women's rights, etc. Some civil rights activists think it would be a good first step for the government to start applying those laws and make public examples of those breaking them. A few highly mediatized prosecutions for child abuse, exploitation and unpaid work, they argue, would discourage people from continuing those practices that affect slaves.

- Fund authoritative studies on slavery: According to special rapporteur Shahinian, it is crucial to fund independent, authoritative studies defining slavery, describing its forms, quantifying its social impact and the number of victims. Establishing a comprehensive corpus of baseline studies will provide anti-slavery activists with irrefutable proof of the problem. Achieving a better understanding the issue will help draft a comprehensive anti-slavery strategy and implement effective programs. In 2010, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) will be conducting a global study on slavery in Mauritania within the framework of a conflict prevention program. Post is hoping to fund a UNICEF study focusing on slavery among women and children that would provide us a factual baseline for

discussion.

- De-personalize the issue: Slavery in Mauritania is an extremely sensitive issue that touches the very core of the established social order. Moors feel attacked when the issue of slavery is brought up and as a result will deny the very existence of slavery and will obstruct or try to dilute any anti-slavery efforts. Some think it would be helpful to stop talking about slavery but talk instead about slavery practices and the consequences of slavery. It is important to avoid reducing slavery to a racial domination issue (white versus black issue) as this is incorrect and could be potentially explosive. Note: Not all Black Moors are or were slaves. Black Afro-Mauritanians, particularly the haalpular have black slaves. In the past, there were white slaves as well. End note. Slavery is more of a caste problem than a strictly racial problem. Also, it is important to remember that any discussion on slavery should touch not only on slavery among the Moors but also among the Afro-Mauritanian population. The problem of slavery should be tackled within the global categories of fight against trafficking and the defense of human, labor, women and children rights. An emphasis should be placed on the fight against abuse and exploitation.

- Encourage dialogue between civil society and government: For anti-slavery programs to be successful, there has to be increased coordination between civil society and the government in drafting a strategy and creating, implementing and monitoring programs. Post is working on funding a forum to encourage civil society and the government to work together.

- Conduct awareness campaigns: Experts point at the necessity of conducting targeted awareness campaigns among slaves, former slaves, masters and the general population. The purpose is to ensure the population is aware that slavery practices constitute a crime and that slaves have rights that are protected by the law. Increasing awareness of the rights of women, children and labor rights would also be useful. It would also be beneficial to recruit local religious leaders to speak against exploitation and abuse and the stigmatization of slaves and lower castes like the ironsmiths and the griots.

- Provide legal assistance programs: The government should be encouraged to provide slaves wishing to bring their cases to court legal assistance at no cost.

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- Train judges and local authorities (walis and hakems): Judicial and local authorities should be trained on the implications of the law criminalizing slavery and the importance of applying it. The central government needs to send a clear message that those refusing to apply the law will be held accountable.

- Stand up an anti-slavery brigade: Elements of the police and gendarmerie should be trained to investigate slavery cases and gather evidence for the court in urban and rural areas (Ref B). Their sole presence will serve as a signal to the population that the government is serious in its commitment to fight slavery.

- Train specialized social workers: A group of social workers specialized in slavery practices, including child slavery, should be trained and deployed every time a slavery case is brought to light. These social workers should work in conjunction with the police to conduct a comprehensive investigation.

- Assistance to victims: Remove children and former slaves from situations of exploitation and refer them to government or NGO authorities that can provide them with care. Such care should include any food, shelter, security, counseling,

supervision, and family reunification assistance needed by the victims.

- Draft a national strategy against slavery: The government should be encouraged to draft a five-year national strategy against slavery in consultation with civil society.

19. (C) Mid and long-term initiatives:

- Create an independent national agency or commission for the reinsertion of slaves and former slaves and a social insertion fund: Many anti-slavery activists and experts agree it would be helpful if an agency or commission could oversee the implementation of the anti-slavery strategy in coordination with other competent ministries. The agency would also be responsible for monitoring the application of the law criminalizing slavery. A social insertion fund would help fund programs towards the social reinsertion of victims.

- Build shelters: Shelters providing temporary housing and social reinsertion services for victims of slavery are necessary as many slaves do not have a place to go when they leave their masters. Women and children would particularly benefit from these shelters.

- Targeted education and training opportunities for slaves: Slaves are often illiterate and only know how to work as household servants, field-workers or shepherds. Literacy programs as well as vocational training would be beneficial to provide them the means to live independently and escape the spiral of exploitation. This measure would be contentious as many think social programs should be open to all ethnicities and groups. It is true that in the interior of the country, "all are united in poverty, including the White Moors."

- Encourage the state to become a civil party in slavery cases: Currently, many slaves withdraw their complaints after caving in to social pressure and manipulation from their families, masters and judges. NGOs would like the state of Mauritania, through the prosecutor, to become a civil party in any slavery cases as this would allow investigations to continue and slave-owners to be punished.

- Strengthen and enforce labor laws, child protection laws and women's rights: Labor laws pertaining to contracts, minimum wage etc. should be strengthened and enforced to ensure that former slaves do not become victims of modern forms of exploitation. Child protection laws and women's rights could serve as a further guarantee to fight against exploitation.

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- Affirmative action programs: The implementation of affirmative action programs for Haratines and Afro-Mauritanians would help traditionally under-represented groups access government positions. This measure would also be controversial.

- Address land tenure issues - Create programs to solve land-tenure disputes and provide slaves access to land. Strengthen land tenure laws.

- Citizenship programs - cultivate the notion of national communities and the idea of Mauritania as a state that regroups citizens from different ethnicities who are equal. Fight against tribalism and castes.

- Target education to bolster vulnerable groups - Some anti-slavery advocates see adult members of vulnerable castes as already locked into an inferiority mindset. For them, only an emphasis on education of youth will allow these

castes to break the chain of inferiority.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) President Aziz stated that his government planned to improve Mauritania's human rights record and this is a crucial area where the Mauriticians could invest resources and efforts. Slavery in Mauritania will not be solved until the authorities accept there is a problem and muster the political will necessary to tackle it. Post will continue to engage the GIRM at all levels and will partner with civil society and others to encourage and facilitate an effective response. End comment.

BOULWARE